



# “A Scandalous Woman”? Beauvoir in Paris, January 2008

## Citation

Suleiman, Susan Rubin. 2009. “A scandalous woman”? Beauvoir in Paris, January 2008. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 124(1): 221–223.

## Published Version

doi:10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.221

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:8944722>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

**Susan Rubin Suleiman**

**"A Scandalous Woman"?  
Beauvoir in Paris, January 2008**

Simone de Beauvoir, France's most famous woman intellectual, was born in Paris on January 9, 1908. Exactly one hundred years later to the day, Paris gave her a birthday party: an international conference presided over by another famous woman intellectual, Julia Kristeva. The conference, held from January 9-11 in the remains of a Franciscan convent that the city has bequeathed to the University of Paris, attracted a large crowd despite the rainy weather and the drafty Gothic hall where you had to sit in your winter coat. At the opening and closing sessions, two of Sarkozy's female ministers made an appearance; in between, the speakers included celebrities who had known Beauvoir (most notably the filmmaker of *Shoah* Claude Lanzmann, who was her young lover in the 1950's and who now edits the journal she and Sartre founded, *Les Temps Modernes*), well-known writers and journalists, activists in the women's movement who had worked with Beauvoir in the last years of her life, old friends who shared their reminiscences, as well as translators of her works and scholars young and old from all over the world. Beauvoir's adopted daughter and literary executor, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, was in attendance throughout the proceedings; all in all, more than fifty people participated in the program. The first Simone de Beauvoir Prize for Women's Freedom was awarded to two women writers known for their courageous critiques of Islamic fundamentalism: the Somalian Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the Bangladeshi Taslina Nasreen, who could not be there in person but who sent greetings. There were film screenings in the evenings, a

"cocktail" at City Hall, and a concluding banquet at La Coupole, where Beauvoir had lunched with Sartre every day for many years.

It was a grand event, a mix of academic conference, official commemoration, and media spectacle. I attended as an invited guest, and enjoyed it greatly.

Meanwhile, the highly respectable, left-leaning weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* published its issue dated January 3-9, 2008. On the cover, next to a headline in bold red and white letters titled "Simone de Beauvoir La Scandaleuse," there appeared a black and white photograph of a beautiful female nude seen from the back. Standing in front of a bathroom mirror, wearing high-heeled white slippers, the dark-haired woman in the photo is tucking her hair into a chignon. Her arms are raised in perfect symmetry, emphasizing the outline of her back; her buttocks appear very white next to the darker hue of her legs and waist. At the bottom of the photo, in small white letters, the caption: "Simone de Beauvoir, Chicago, 1952." Inside, on page 8, the lead story begins: it is a long, well-documented journalistic account of Beauvoir's life and career by staff writer Agathe Logeart, illustrated with a number of photographs, including again the photo on the cover—but this time we see more of the bathroom where the woman is standing, and we also see a few unflattering folds on the back of her right thigh. A closer inspection will reveal that the cover photo has been touched up in a couple of other places as well, and cast with a soft pinkish glow that makes it appear more "arty"—or more like a pinup. The original photo, we are told inside, was taken by the American photographer Art Shay, a friend of Beauvoir's lover Nelson Algren who had taken her to another friend's apartment so that she could take a bath (Algren, whom she was visiting, had no bathtub). Seeing her through the open door, Shay had snapped the photo, but she didn't mind.

"Naughty boy!" she said when she heard the shutter click. (The photo was first published in a book of Shay's work, *Album for an Age*, in 2000).

The subject of an international centennial *hommage*, the celebrated author whose *Second Sex* had set into motion a major wave of 20<sup>th</sup>-century feminism, was also a beautiful and sexy woman, living her life "scandalously," exactly as she wanted to. That was the substance of the *Nouvel Obs*'s lead story; and that, presumably, was the motivating logic behind the photo on the cover as well. Since Beauvoir had often been caricatured, during her lifetime, as a schoolmarmish bluestocking, the *Nouvel Obs* could pride itself on presenting a vibrant and attractive image of this feminist heroine. Of course, the editors of the magazine must not have minded too much that the issue sold out at all the newsstands. Nor were they chagrined, we may assume, when major newspapers published articles and letters "pro" and "contra" the nude photograph and web sites buzzed with opinions about it. One blogger, quoted in the weekend edition of the daily *Libération* (12-13 January, p. 5), expressed his indignation at the touch-ups on the cover, considering them an insult to Beauvoir; more to the point, he wondered when the day would come when a national weekly printed a photo of *Sartre's* "naked buttocks."

And there, of course, is the rub. While it is undeniable that women have made huge progress in France over the past fifty years, both materially and in terms of social norms and expectations, and while it is undeniable that Simone de Beauvoir's work and activities contributed greatly to that progress, it is also a fact that no major *male* writer or philosopher—let alone one whose centenary was being celebrated--would be displayed naked on the cover of a serious magazine. It is not a trivial question but a deeply ideological one, whose naked body can or cannot be exhibited in public with impunity.

Ideologies are power plays; and as Beauvoir so forcefully demonstrated in *The Second Sex*, they have been, for most of known history, the creation of men; especially so where the female body and the "feminine" are concerned. As if to underline the contrast, the very same issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur* that carried Beauvoir's nude photo also carried, just before the lead story about her, a pious homage to Julien Gracq, a highly esteemed writer who had died a few weeks earlier at the age of 97. Accompanying the article were two photos: a small head shot of the writer taken when he must have been around sixty, and a larger photo in color, showing him as an old man walking by the river near his Breton village, dressed in a dark pullover and wearing a tweed cap. Gracq, little known outside of France but venerated by many French readers for his contempt of celebrity as well as for the quality of his prose, had the distinction of being the only living author to see his complete works appear in the Editions de la Pléiade—the ultimate sign of consecration in French letters.

To be sure, many magazines besides the *Nouvel Obs*, both popular and scholarly, have devoted special issues to Beauvoir this year, *sans* the controversial photo; and there have been and will be more centennial conferences, including a major one at New York University in September. But that photo on the cover, so beautiful and so troubling, illustrates wonderfully the ambivalent attitudes that Beauvoir—and perhaps all powerful women?—still evokes, and not only in France. Admiration, respect, passionate love, even; but also, perhaps, a certain condescension, and the feeling that she was not quite the equal of the "great writers" who were her contemporaries and whose company she kept. Two thick volumes of Sartre's works have already appeared in the Editions de la Pléiade (the fiction in 1981, one year after his death, the theater in 2005); I understand that

Beauvoir's memoirs are "in preparation," which is a good sign; but it will take several years before they appear, and it is not clear when (if ever) the novels and essays will be published ever.

Philippe Sollers, one of the celebrities who spoke at the conference in January, stated repeatedly that he considers her an "absolutely marvelous" writer and that he finds her prose extraordinary, as much for its style as for its thought. At first, listening to him, I had the sense that such affirmations, no matter how sincere, did not quite do the job: too general, too categorical, the way one praises the accomplishments of a brilliant child. I was more reassured by the fine-grained attention that many scholars displayed in analyzing her works. Until recently, much of the scholarly attention toward Beauvoir has come from outside France. For many years, American and British feminist philosophers have been studying her work with the care it deserves; it is largely due to pressure from those scholars that a new, much needed translation of *The Second Sex* will appear in English in 2009 (translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, who spoke at the January conference).

On second thought, however, it occurs to me that the fact that an influential writer like Sollers—who is not known for being particularly sympathetic to feminism—praises Beauvoir's prose style may indicate a new trend and a welcome reevaluation of her accomplishment as a writer. Personally, I have never found her style extraordinary, the way, say, Beckett's or Nathalie Sarraute's style is; but I do believe (as does Sollers) that she has written some great novels, and one in particular: *The Mandarins*, which won the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1954 but is not as well known as it should be. I teach it in a course on 20<sup>th</sup>-century French realist fiction, and consider it one of the truly major

examples of that genre. Unlike Sartre, who never managed to write a novel about "engagé" intellectuals despite his theoretical declarations on the subject, Beauvoir in *The Mandarins* gives us a broad and varied canvas of French intellectual life in the years immediately following World War II. Her book is a great historical novel as well as a complex exploration of love, family ties, and the inner lives of thinking women and men who are fully engaged in the public events of their time. It is a marvelous achievement—far more deserving of front-page status than the unclothed body, attractive as it undoubtedly is, of its creator.

#### Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *Les Mandarins*. Paris: Gallimard, 1954; *The Mandarins*, trans. Leonard M. Friedman. Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1956.
- Garcin, Jérôme. "Julie Gracq. Le roi des Mauges." *Le Nouvel Observateur*, no. 2252 (3-9 January 2008). Pp. 6-7.
- Libération*. "L'insulte faite à Beauvoir." 12-13 January 2008. P. 5.
- Logeart, Agathe. "Simone la scandaleuse." *Le Nouvel Observateur*, no. 2252 (3-9 January 2008). Pp. 8-19.